Florida Teacher Wins Fight Against Standardized Testing—for Now

By Heather Kays

It was a calculated act of civil disobedience. Susan Bowles, a veteran teacher of 26 years, knew exactly what she was doing when she refused to administer the FAIR standardized test to her kindergarten students at Lawton Chiles Elementary School in Gainesville, Florida.

She risked a job she loves to do what she knew was right for her students: Administering FAIR testing, some of which would need to be computerized, several times a year to kindergarten students is wrong and counterproductive.

Then, something amazing happened. Instead of her being...
Lots of people talk about school reform, but how much change actually occurs?

Here’s an idea that has promise: the Parent Trigger. If a majority of parents and guardians of children at a particular school sign a petition demanding reform, then the school district must do as the parents ask.

This Policy Brief looks at the Parent Trigger laws already in place and how they have worked in practice, and it offers suggestions to parents and elected officials for crafting their own legislation.

The Parent Trigger: Justification and Design Guidelines
By Joseph L. Bast and Joy Pullmann
October 2012, 49pp., $7.95

free download at www.heartland.org
For more information about the Parent Trigger, visit theparenttrigger.com
KIPP Schools Raise Achievement, Don’t Skim Best Students, Study Says

By Ashley Bateman

The Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) is a college-preparatory, community-transforming powerhouse. The charter network accounts for 192 schools and 50,000 students across 20 states, and it has consistently and substantially increased achievement among underprivileged students. Critics of KIPP, however, have attributed high achievement to a student body primed for success from the start and data that don’t account for attrition rates.

A new and rigorous study proves otherwise. KIPP produces excellent results with the same or lower-performing students as traditional public schools, and with similar attrition rates.

The largest-scale study of KIPP found the schools’ cumulative impact on students accounts for nearly eight to 11 months of additional learning. And 80 percent of those students are from low-income families.

Refutes Opponents’ Claims

Commissioned by KIPP, Mathematica Policy Research tackled the topic of attrition in KIPP schools as critics claimed the schools’ high achievement was due to an above-average entering student body with markedly low attrition rates. This raised the question of whether the KIPP model is replicable with varying student bodies.

“We had heard the concern raised before, so we wanted to know to what extent there was empirical evidence supporting it or not,” said study coauthor Brian Gill. “It’s potentially relevant to how generalizable KIPP’s strategies and impact might be.”

The study’s authors found KIPP students are more likely to be black, Hispanic, and low-income than their peers in district schools. The achievement of KIPP students in fourth grade, prior to entering KIPP, is lower on average than average district scores.

According to the report, the researchers found no “consistent pattern of differences in attrition rates between KIPP and district schools.” There is no evidence low-achieving kids are being pushed out, Gill says.

“KIPP is producing those positive impacts with kids who are not advantaged in any measurable dimension when they arrive at KIPP. They are overwhelmingly low income, low achieving, and comparable to other kids in their neighborhood schools.”

Emphasis on Character Development

KIPP addresses academics and character with a “laser-like focus,” said Steve Mancini, KIPP director of public affairs.

“We are very selective in how we choose teachers and then train for a year through the Fisher training program,” Mancini said. “We build [each school] from the ground up.”

Though the KIPP model drives success, the program decentralizes authority to ensure control is local.

“We allow local boards to hire leadership, and ultimately the principals have the power to lead,” Mancini said.

KIPP has focused on transparency by commissioning gold-standard studies and providing the public with regular reviews of its schools, said Mancini.

“The results definitely reflected what we understood about our schools, but it was helpful to have somebody else come to that conclusion with objective evidence [proving] that this was a trend across all of our schools,” Mancini said. “We knew that we were getting kids coming in lower academically. ... We knew it was a misconception that we were getting kids who were more able. Mathematica gave us a comparison to the reality in the schools in the district that we served.”

‘Teach for America’ Connection

Mancini credits Teach for America corps members for bolstering KIPP’s success.

“Half of our principals are alumni of Teach for America, and 30 percent of our teachers are either corps members or alumni inside of KIPP,” Mancini said. “People often forget that connection. They are our founding. [Without TFA] we couldn’t have achieved the success that we have reached to date.”

“It’s hard for me to read how much impact this one study will have, but it’s clear in Illinois, outside of Chicago, we have a very small representation of charter schools,” said Ted Dabrowski of the Illinois Policy Institute. “I think that’s indicative of the problems of not giving families more choice and more alternatives.”

He added, “[The KIPP] model is very different from the traditional public school model as a system. High expectations, ability to innovate, and empower[ing] teachers and principals are lessons that could be learned from traditional schools, but those lessons will only be learned if you allow more charters and options to blossom. These schools are free to do different things, and we need that.”

Ashley Bateman (bateman_aa@googlemail.com) writes from Alexandria, Virginia.
Florida Teacher Wins Fight Against Testing—for Now

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fired or reprimanded in September, the policy was changed. Now, K–12 students will not be required to take the FAIR tests Bowles refused to administer.

**Required Computer Skills**

In a letter Bowles wrote to parents, she explained that even though she would be in breach of contract, she couldn’t in good conscience give the test to her students. Bowles says the FAIR testing, which is required three times per year, would have required kindergarten students to complete testing on a computer using a mouse.

Although many of her students are well-versed in using tablets or smartphones, most had not used a desktop computer before. Once an answer is clicked, even if a mistake was made and a student accidentally clicked the wrong response, there is no way to go back to correct it. So the data that would have been collected would not have been accurate.

“While we were told it takes about 35 minutes to administer, we are finding that in actuality, it is taking between 35–60 minutes per child,” Bowles wrote. “This assessment is given one-on-one. It is recommended that both teacher and child wear headphones during the test. Someone has forgotten there are other five-year-olds in our care.”

Bowles’ problem was not with the people she works for. “This is not an education problem. This is a government problem,” she wrote.

Bowles was not directly named in the letter to parents from officials changing the testing policy, but the letter does mention the recent attention surrounding the issue.

**Superintendent Agrees**

Dr. Owen Roberts, superintendent of Alachua County Public Schools, expressed agreement with Bowles regarding standardized testing.

“I believe there is too much standardized testing going on, and that much of it does not offer educational benefits for our students. Many of the tests are also poorly designed and/or implemented,” said Roberts. “That being the case, I think the public debate over this issue is a very important one, and I hope it will spur state leaders to seriously review all the testing mandates they’ve adopted.”

Ben Scafidi, a senior fellow at the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice and a professor of economics, said his 2013 study, *More Than Scores: An Analysis of Why and How Parents Choose Private Schools*, indicates parents do not list testing scores as a top priority when they are considering where to send their children to school. He conducted the study with James P. Kelly, surveying 754 parents whose children received scholarships to attend private schools of their choice through the Georgia GOAL Scholarship Program.

The study examined the school choices of low- and middle-income parents for their children when transferring out of public schools. It showed parents consider classroom management to be much more important than standardized test scores. Only 10.2 percent of the parents listed standardized test scores as one of their top five reasons for choosing a particular school. The issues of most concern cited by parents included student discipline at 50.9 percent; better learning environment at 50.8 percent; improved student safety at 46.8 percent; and more individualized attention for students at 39.8 percent.

**‘This Teacher Is a Hero’**

Scafidi said he admires teachers like Bowles who take a stand on behalf of their students in regards to testing.

“The reality is this teacher is a hero,” said Scafidi, noting if Bowles had been fired or pushed out of her job she would have had to relocate to a different county to teach. “It is very difficult for teachers to stand up. That’s courage.”

Although some students may be familiar with computers, administrators cannot consider it a given for all students, Scafidi says.

“A lot of little kids don’t have a computer at home,” he said. “Low-income students don’t have a computer at home. Giving a test like that to kindergarten students is silly.”

**‘Surprised and Pleased’**

Bowles said she feels lucky to have had the opportunity to speak her mind, because her husband was supportive and her children are grown. Bowles says that after hearing the policy had changed, she yelled, cried, and did a happy dance with other teachers who had been waiting outside her classroom because they had already heard the news.

“I was surprised and pleased that they actually backtracked on the FAIR, suspending it for one year,” said Bowles, adding that tension over standardized testing has increased because of Common Core. “Of course the fear is it will be back next year with a few tweaks.”

Bowles says the reason for her act of civil disobedience was the impact FAIR testing was having on her relationship with her students and the lack of time she had left to teach.

“**This fight should continue—not just regarding the excessive testing that takes away from our children’s learning—but also for the standards that have been adopted that are not developmentally sound, at least for elementary students,**” Bowles said. “I can speak for the elementary grades that any developmental psychologist or early childhood educator would tell you that these standards are inappropriate.”

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For a Free Society, Promote School Choice

By Jason Bedrick

Many Americans are caught up in the political squabbles surrounding several recent and important Supreme Court (SCOTUS) decisions.

If the SCOTUS decisions and their fallout reveal anything, it’s that too many Americans are willing to use the government to coerce their fellow citizens into behaving a certain way. Such people lack the virtue of political tolerance, which Thomas Jefferson argued was the foundation of “social harmony … the first of human felicities.”

What sort of education system is most likely to foster that political tolerance?

People often assume government-controlled “public” schools are the best tools for inculcating political tolerance. After all, Horace Mann’s vision of the “common school” involved bringing together students from ethnically and religiously diverse backgrounds and training them to be good citizens.

Private schools, by contrast, are not required to take all students, and many are religiously sectarian. President Barack Obama made this claim when visiting Ireland in 2013: “If towns remain divided—if Catholics have their schools and buildings, and Protestants have theirs—if we can’t see ourselves in one another, if fear and resentment are allowed to harden, that encourages division. It discourages cooperation.”

Surely the common schools do a better job inculcating the value of political tolerance than sectarian schools—right?

Govt. Schools Force Social Conflict

In reality, as my colleague Neal McCluskey has painstakingly demonstrated, government schools often force citizens into political conflict. Parents and educators clash over issues of pedagogy, curriculum, morality, and sexual-unity. Too often, deciding which policies a government school will adopt is a zero-sum game—because both sides can’t win and resentment inevitably follows.

Moreover, the empirical evidence demonstrates private schools (including religiously sectarian ones) do as well as or better than government schools at inculcating political tolerance.

In 2007, Dr. Patrick Wolf of the University of Arkansas conducted a literature review of the research on schooling and political tolerance.

“The most commonly used method of measuring such political tolerance first asks respondents to either think of their least-liked political group or select one from a list that includes such groups as the Ku Klux Klan, American Nazis, the religious right, and gay activists,” Wolf said in his review. “It then asks whether respondents would permit members of the disliked group to exercise constitutional rights such as making a public speech, running for political office, and teaching in the public schools.

“In reality, … government schools often force citizens into political conflict. Parents and educators clash over issues of pedagogy, curriculum, morality, and sexual-unity. Too often, deciding which policies a government school will adopt is a zero-sum game—because both sides can’t win and resentment inevitably follows.”

Education Policy, Political Values

The studies do not tell us why private schools tend to outperform government schools at fostering political tolerance. Dr. Jay P. Greene, author of two of the studies in Wolf’s literature review, offered two potential explanations: “It may be that private schools are better at teaching civic values like tolerance, just as they may be more effective at teaching math or reading. It is also possible that, contrary to elite suspicion, religion can teach important lessons about human equality and dignity that inspire tolerance.”

It may also be that private schools recognize the importance of the political tolerance that allows them to operate without government intrusion. The same political tolerance that protects them also protects other institutions and groups, including those with diametrically opposite values.

Whereas government schools force zero-sum conflicts—meaning some people ultimately prevail at forcing their view on others—a market in education allows parents to select the schools that reflect their own values.

A free society requires political tolerance. The most likely education system to foster that tolerance is one rooted in free choice—an important consideration to weigh as the debate over school choice continues in state houses across the nation.

Jason Bedrick (jbedrick@cato.org) is an education analyst at the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom. Article reprinted with permission from Cato Institute.
Common Core Boosts Homeschooling in N. Carolina

Continued from page 1

Taylor, who began activism against Common Core in 2009, says even homeschool parents have to exercise caution about the standards. “I have met people almost on a daily basis who are escaping Common Core Standards via home education because the traditional system is failing their families. My main concern is that they receive the proper guidance in remaining Common Core Standard-free.”

Standards Called Illegal, Impractical
Taylor disputes both the legality and the practicality of the curriculum she seeks to escape. “Our 10th Amendment and at least three federal education laws are broken” by it, she said. “No legislative votes were cast to give us vetted, tested, educator-created standards. Little to no allowances are made for young, developing minds at their pace, those with special needs, or the gifted.”

Taylor cites the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act, which states, “Nothing in this Act shall be construed to authorize an officer or employee of the Federal Government to mandate, direct, or control a State, local educational agency, or school’s curriculum, program of instruction, or allocation of State and local resources.” In addition, she notes, the General Education Provisions Act and the Department of Education Organization Act both limit federal control over school curricula.

Taylor and other Common Core critics argue many states were baited into adopting the standards in hopes of obtaining the Department of Education’s Race to the Top grant money.

Variety of Reasons
Parent Spencer Mason, who homeschooled his four children in North Carolina, says there are a variety of reasons why home education’s popularity has increased in his state. “I think the steady growth of homeschools in North Carolina is due to three main factors,” Mason said.

“One, the favorable North Carolina homeschool law and the good support system. Two, more and more families are seeing the results of home education and desiring the same results for their children. And three, dissatisfaction with the public school system. I think the recent spike in the number of homeschools is partially the result of parents learning about how the Common Core State Standards will affect their children.”

Mason says the economy could be another factor. “I think the economic downturn in 2009 has led to the decline in the number of private school students in general and has made homeschooling attractive to more families,” he said.

The substantial surge in homeschooling over the past few years may have led to the North Carolina state legislature’s recent decision to replace Common Core State Standards with new ones. Gov. Pat McCrory (R) signed Senate Bill 812 in July, effectively repealing Common Core in the state with the stated intention of implementing new standards designed specifically for North Carolinians.

The question now is how closely the North Carolina Higher Academic Standards will resemble Common Core. The current plan is said to resemble an earlier Senate proposal that retained some aspects of the standards.

Committee in Control
Exactly what the new standards entail will depend largely on the committee members appointed by State Board of Education to review and approve them, and the recently selected members are likely to bring diverse perspectives. McCrory made one appointment himself, selecting IBM executive Andre Peek for his business knowledge. Soon after his appointment, Peek reportedly told NC Policy Watch he has always supported Common Core.

Other appointees include John T. Scheick, a retired math professor from Duke University and UNC Chapel Hill, who was recommended to state Sen. Phil Berger (R-NC) as a Common Core skeptic, and former assistant principal Laurie McCollum, also appointed by Berger, who said she would have slowly phased in Common Core.

Kevin McClain, president of North Carolinians for Home Education, says he would prefer the legislature simply step out of it. “I think curricular and assessment decisions are in the purview of instructors and parents, and legislative activity concerning curriculum and assessment are an ultimately unproductive act of statecraft and a poor strategy for a truly public education system,” he said.

McClain did not express much optimism regarding increases in home education possibly becoming a trend in other states battling over Common Core. “I certainly hope so,” McClain said. “However, every state has different laws governing homeschooling, and some states erect unjust barriers for parents to exercise their liberty to educate their children. North Carolinians are fortunate to live in a state that recognizes parents’ authority in decisions regarding the education of their child.”

Chris Neal (cdobro245@gmail.com) writes from New York, New York.
L.A. School District Defies Parent Trigger Law

By Ashley Bateman

With the Obama administration unilaterally giving states No Child Left Behind (NCLB) waivers, one California district is attempting to defer choice for parents who petition for their legal right to transform failing schools.

In a letter to former state Sen. Gloria Romero (D-CA), the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) recently claimed it is no longer beholden to the state’s “parent trigger” law because federal accountability mandates under NCLB have been lifted. Proponents of the law say the claim has no legal ground.

Under the law, also referred to as the “parent empowerment law,” a majority of parents can require reforms at a failing school by petition. The parent trigger was passed in California in 2010 and has been passed in several other states since then.

If half the parents in a failing district sign the petition, they can choose to transform the traditional public school into a charter school, replace the staff, make budget decisions, dismiss the principal, or even shut down the school and relocate students to other schools.

“The district’s claim has no legitimacy,” said Ben Boychuk, a policy advisor to The Heartland Institute, which publishes School Reform News. “The federal waiver the district received does not exempt it from other state and federal laws related to accountability. In fact, the waiver’s language is explicit on that point.”

“We don’t really understand even a basic legal reasoning that LAUSD would use; we can’t think of any,” said Adrienne Wallace, press secretary for Parent Revolution, a group working through grassroots community organizing. “In addition to there being no sort of recent … federal [precedent] … it has not [been] deemed unconstitutional. … It violates the spirit of the parent trigger [and] … their local parent rights.”

Forcing Negotiation

Parent Revolution has worked to transform five schools utilizing the parent trigger law, and in each instance, an option under the law has been fully enacted or used as leverage to negotiate with school boards to institute parent-initiated changes. The most recent case was at West Athens Elementary School in West Athens, California.

“The parents organizing [forced] the district to come to the table and negotiate,” Wallace said. “The district ended up developing a school improvement plan and funded that. We saw principals working together with teachers [and] working with parents. Some parts of the district are willing to collaborate.”

The law was used to shut down and reopen 24th Street Elementary as a charter-hybrid school, and at Weigand Elementary, an unpopular principal was removed and 21 teachers resigned.

The West Athens case is unique in that a full “trigger” of the law was never implemented.

Internal Strife, New Assessments

“It’s not necessarily a case of the district feeling threatened by the parent trigger,” Boychuk said. “Superintendent John Deasy is on record supporting the law. He’s gone out of his way to accommodate parents trying to use the law. But it’s a confusing position for the district to take, and one clearly unsupported by the federal waiver.”

District school board leaders recently clarified the parent trigger process, approving guidelines to better navigate the law in early September. The new guidelines, which received a 5–2 majority vote, prohibit the district from advocating for or against the law while increasing public communication.

As the state creates new standardized tests, in addition to the state’s Academic Performance Index (API), opponents of the law may try this year to utilize the new assessments to defer parent trigger action at failing schools.

“It’s important to remember that California’s Parent Empowerment Act is tied to the state’s Academic Performance Index,” Boychuk said. “New tests are coming, but the API isn’t going away. Districts may try to duck the parent trigger by saying the new testing regime supersedes the law. They would be inviting legal trouble in that case.”

Trigger Proponents Kept Quiet

Only recently made public but discussed among district and choice groups since last year, the LAUSD announcement was not a surprise to all parent trigger proponents.

Wallace says Parent Revolution became aware of the issue last November but felt a formal statement would make an issue out of something that legally held no ground.

“We continued to organize and support parents,” Wallace said. “We’ve always let parents know we’d continue to support them in their work no matter what.”

Romero, who authored the parent trigger law, disagrees with that decision. “Last year they should have immediately blown the whistle on LA Unified, challenged them publicly, and let me know as the writer of the law,” Romero said. “They acknowledge they disagreed, but they never made it public and never sued.”

‘A Really Big Impact’

Parent Revolution will sue the district if parents are denied the right to trigger a school, says Wallace.

“We’ve never been afraid to take a district to court, which we’ve done with some of our past campaigns,” Wallace said.

“We’ve seen, really powerfully, parents beginning to talk about their rights and that they have power to really take responsibility of their child’s education,” Wallace added. “We support parents and their efforts. Not just the process of organizing but becoming an organization and learning their rights … how they can act as citizens. It has had a really big impact on a number of our parents.”

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School Voucher Opponents in 3 States File Lawsuits

By Chris Neal

Opponents of school choice are bringing lawsuits in multiple states claiming school vouchers provide public money to private, religious institutions; some of these lawsuits posit a confused notion of what their state’s laws actually are.

The Supreme Court of New Hampshire recently upheld the state’s tax credit scholarship program as constitutional, because the money comes from private donors rather than taxpayers. Under the law, corporations receive a tax credit worth 85 percent of what they donate to nonprofit organizations that offer private school scholarships to low-income families. The court found the program does not violate the state’s Blaine Amendment, which forbids public funds from being sent to religious-based schools, because the funds used do not come from a publicly funded source.

The New Hampshire court’s ruling mirrors the 2011 U.S. Supreme Court finding that money voluntarily contributed to scholarship organizations is not the same as money collected by the state. Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote, “Like contributions that lead to charitable tax deductions, contributions yielding tax credits are not owed to the State and, in fact, pass directly from taxpayers to private organizations.”

Kate Baker, executive director of New Hampshire’s Network for Educational Opportunity, praised the decision. “We are thrilled that the New Hampshire Supreme Court has shown unanimity that empowering parents to make educational decisions for their children does not violate any provision of our state constitution,” Baker said. “We are eager to get to work awarding scholarships to low-income families without having to discriminate based on what sort of private school the parents want their children to attend.”

Florida Program Challenged

Scholarship proponents are mounting a similar defense in Florida, where tax credit scholarships are also receiving scrutiny. The state teachers union and school board association recently filed suit, arguing the program is unconstitutional. Although a county judge has already shot down the suit, it will likely move on to a higher court through appeal. Bill Mottox, a resident fellow at the Florida-based James Madison Institute, says acceptance of the constitutionality of tax credit scholarships should not depend on whether one agrees with them as public policy. Most of the opposition to Florida’s law is based on a fundamental misconception, he says.

“We think the Florida courts should uphold the constitutionality of our tax credit scholarship program for the same reason the New Hampshire courts did—because these monies come from private businesses. Certainly, we hope they’ll do the right thing, especially since there’s considerable evidence that our state’s students are benefiting greatly from education choice.”

Oklahoma Program Struck Down

Some other states might not be able to make the same defense. A district court in Oklahoma has determined part of the state’s voucher law unconstitutional, ruling it subsidizes religious institutions with taxpayer dollars. Unlike New Hampshire’s and Florida’s programs, Oklahoma’s private school scholarships are publicly funded.

Matt Frendewey, national communications director of the Oklahoma Federation for Children, is not convinced that this suit will be found meritless. “Make no mistake; these lawsuits are not about aid to religious schools,” Frendewey said. “Nearly every program is designed to ensure tax dollars are only spent on educational services. Ultimately, these lawsuits are about trying to deny parents the right to choose the best educational environment for their child.”

A recent election suggested many voters agree the voucher program should remain in place, as school choice advocate Chuck Strohm defeated District 69 school board member Melissa Abdo, who had supported the lawsuit challenging public vouchers, in a runoff election for a vacant House seat.

Frendewey says the lawsuit in Oklahoma is “part of a shameful national effort by the status quo and teachers unions who support the antiquated top-down model of education. We’re hopeful that this suit will be found meritless and will be tossed out like a previous attempt to upend Oklahoma’s school choice program for special-needs children.”

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“We think the Florida courts should uphold the constitutionality of our tax credit scholarship program for the same reason the New Hampshire courts did—because these monies come from private businesses,” Mottox said. “Certainly, we hope they’ll do the right thing, especially since there’s considerable evidence that our state’s students are benefiting greatly from education choice. Thanks to education choice and other recent reforms, our special-needs students now outperform those in every other state, according to [the National Assessment of Educational Progress].”

Chris Neal (cdobro245@gmail.com) writes from New York, New York.
Private Schools Can Learn from Charters, Study Says

By Mary C. Tillotson

While private schools—in particular, Catholic schools—have experienced an enrollment decline in recent years, the Catholic school network Cristo Rey has flourished, opening two to three schools each year.

Private schools could benefit from organizing into networks like Cristo Rey, according to a new study by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice.

“A set of organizations realized if there’s one great charter, you can replicate and expand it by creating a [charter management organization], a central office that takes your one great school and replicates and expands so it can be two, 20, 40 schools,” said report author Andy Smarick. “In private school sectors, all these individual, autonomous schools don’t have much central support, don’t have other schools or shared staff that they can rely on.”

Many charter schools belong to similar networks, but it’s uncommon for private schools to function like this.

Success for Low-Income Students

The Cristo Rey schools enroll only low-income students in grades 9–12. When students enroll, most are two years behind their peers, but by the time they graduate, they’ve been accepted to college. Unique to Cristo Rey schools is that every student works at a local business, with groups of four or five students sharing an entry-level job.

“A typical student … might come in not all that interested in school, but he’s working [part time] at a law firm or insurance company,” said Jack Crowe, COO and general counsel for the network. “Typically, they really like that. They enjoy it, and they work hard and do well at it. It helps them to aspire to try harder in school once they realize they can become a lawyer or a doctor.”

Jack Crowe, Chief Operating Officer
CRISTO REY NETWORK

“A typical student … might come in not all that interested in school, but he’s working [part time] at a law firm or insurance company. Typically, they really like that. They enjoy it, and they work hard and do well at it. It helps them to aspire to try harder in school once they realize they can become a lawyer or a doctor.”

“Both sectors would reap enormous benefit[s] from greater collaboration,” Smarick wrote in the report. “Charter and private schools operate under different regulations, but have many of the same concerns.”

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Will the Supreme Court End Forced Unionism?

By Larry Sand

June was not kind to Big Labor. First, teachers unions in California had some of their favorite work rules knocked out of the state constitution by Judge Rolf Treu in his Vergara decision. Then, on the last day of the month, the U.S. Supreme Court agreed with the National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation in Harris v. Quinn and ruled home care workers could not be forced to join the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

Vergara upset the teachers union pooh-bahs who just can’t believe educators who hang on to their jobs for 16 months aren’t entitled to them for life regardless of whether they’re good, mediocre, or teachers from hell. The decision is going to be appealed, and no one knows, if the appeal fails, how the subsequent replacement laws will play out. But if Vergara got the unions in a snit, Harris has pushed them into apoplexy.

Regarding Harris, I searched the Internet long and hard to find a statement from a union leader that went something like this: “The decision doesn’t harm the union movement in the least. It gives hardworking men and women the freedom to choose whether or not to join us. If they do join, they will enjoy the benefits and perks that come with union membership. If they choose not to join, we will not force them to. They are free to make whatever deal they and their employer agree to. As patriotic Americans, we believe in liberty, and that means giving all workers a choice.”

Okay, I confess. I really didn’t search long and hard. In fact, I didn’t search at all; it would have been a complete waste of time. Instead, we were treated to union leaders doing what they usually do when they don’t get their way: trotting out the usual half-truths, fear-mongering, and lies to rally the troops and garner public sympathy.

Nothing Fair about Force

“This court has built a record of weakening the rights of both voters and working families; no one should be surprised by this decision,” said American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten in a statement that seems to suggest one working family has a right to force a member of another working family into a union.

According to Chalkbeat New York, “Dennis Van Roekel, president of the National Education Association, the nation’s largest teachers union, defended the ‘fair share’ practice. ‘Fair share simply makes sure that all educators share the cost of negotiations for benefits that all educators enjoy, regardless of whether they are association members.’” There is nothing fair about forcing a worker to pay dues to an organization that he or she does not want to belong to.

Narrow Decision

Harris was a narrow decision. As the Wall Street Journal noted on June 30, Justice Samuel Alito’s ruling drew a distinction between the home care workers and “full-fledged” public employees “who were required to pay union dues under the Court’s Abood v. Detroit Board of Education precedent in 1977. In that sense, unions dodged a more sweeping decision that could have jeopardized dues payments from all public workers.”

But—and this is what’s scaring the spit out of unionistas—Alito added Abood (which maintains it is illegal to withhold forced dues from dissenters beyond the cost of collective bargaining) is “questionable on several grounds.” Collective bargaining issues “are inherently political in the public sector,” said Alito.

“In the private sector, the line is easier to see. Collective bargaining concerns the union’s dealings with the employer; political advocacy and lobbying are directed at the government. … But in the public sector, both collective bargaining and political advocacy and lobbying are directed at the government,” Alito said.

Clearly, Alito left the door open for the court to do an “Abood face.” The next shoe that drops could lead to the unions’ worst nightmare: making union membership optional nationwide. At this time, 26 states are forced-union states, and 24 are right-to-work.

Another Potential Blow to Unions

In fact, that “next shoe” is awaiting a fitting. Friedricks v. CTA is on a path to reach the U.S. Supreme Court within a year or two. This litigation has 10 teachers and the Christian Educators Association International—a union alternative—taking on the California Teachers Association with a lawsuit aimed squarely at California’s “agency-shop” law, which forces teachers to pay dues for collective bargaining while making payments toward unions’ political agenda optional. The plaintiffs’ lawyers argue collective bargaining is inherently political and thus all union dues should be voluntary.

Terry Pell, president of the Center for Individual Rights, a public-interest law firm representing Rebecca Friedricks and her co-plaintiffs, was upbeat after the Harris ruling was announced: “Today’s decision is a good sign of things to come. The Court will soon have before it another union dues case, one that asks it to recognize the First Amendment rights of all employees to decide whether to pay union dues, not just home health care workers.”

If Friedricks is successful and the Court overturns Abood, workers will have a choice. To paraphrase President Barack Obama, “If you like your union, you can keep your union.” But if you don’t, you can’t be forced to join or to stay. Freedom of choice—sounds like the American way to me.

Larry Sand (lsand@sbcglobal.net), a former classroom teacher, is president of the nonprofit California Teachers Empowerment Network.

“In the private sector, the line is easier to see. Collective bargaining concerns the union’s dealings with the employer; political advocacy and lobbying are directed at the government. … But in the public sector, both collective bargaining and political advocacy and lobbying are directed at the government.”

SAMUEL ALITO, U.S. SUPREME COURT JUSTICE

The nine members of the U.S. Supreme Court.
Longer School Years Spark Debate

By Morgan Sweeney

As most children returned to school this August, they may have found others never left.

More children are in school year-round, or before- and after-hours, or get shorter summer breaks. Forty-nine states include extended learning time in their education laws, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL). Typically, these are after-school, extra tutoring, or other remedial programs for students who are behind their peers.

A 2011 report by the Wallace Foundation states: “The Education Commission of the States found that 35 states and the District of Columbia have policies that either promote or mandate summer learning programs for academic remediation.” Another Wallace Foundation report, published in 2014, found: “Stakeholders had strong praise for the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation’s long-term commitment to supporting the Afterschool Alliance and the state-wide afterschool networks (since Mott’s initiative began in 2002, the number of states with afterschool networks has risen to 40).”

President Barack Obama has advocated for requirements that will mandate more classroom time. Low-performing schools looking to receive federal school improvement grants must, according to the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, feature “increased learning time.”

Focus on Low-Achieving Students

NCSL’s survey of the research on increasing class time finds no conclusive proof it is effective overall. Sometimes it improves student achievement, sometimes it does not. The National Center on Time & Learning, a group advocating more school time, found nine of 10 schools surveyed considered increased time necessary for “meeting their educational goals.”

Economist Caroline Hoxby studied New York City charter schools and found charters were more effective than traditional schools in closing achievement gaps between rich and poor students.

Tina Bruno, executive director of The Coalition for a Traditional School Calendar, says increased time in the classroom is a bad idea except for schools where many students’ native language is not English.

Bruno first experienced year-round schooling about 18 years ago, when a company she worked for tasked her with running an adopt-a-school program for a very low-performing school. When she arrived, teachers told her the school was going to change to a year-round calendar, with the goal, among others, of reducing summer learning loss.

Kids Exhausted

At first, Bruno says, she was excited and hopeful. The school adopted a nine-weeks-on, three-weeks-off schedule, with no extended summer break. But the year turned into a tug-of-war, with Bruno and the teachers on one side and the students on the other.

Students did not attend inter-sessions and extra classes many year-round schools institute for the weeks off. As a result, the teachers spent each first week back in review.

The shorter summer break meant teachers trying to get their master’s degrees had to do so during school evenings, cutting into class prep time. Students were less able to participate in summer programs and camps. The school also experienced a dramatic rise in electricity costs in order to cool the school during the hottest part of the year.

Finally, Bruno noticed a drop in students’ excitement for returning to school.

“When the shorter breaks, kids never had a chance to get bored, and so the grass was not greener in the schoolyard,” she said. “They grumbled the whole time.”

Sometimes It Works

Some school calendars go halfway. Chandler Unified School District in Arizona operates on a semi-year-round schedule—nine-weeks-on, followed by two off, with a six-week summer break—and it is one of the highest-performing districts in the state. Last year, Chandler was the only district in Arizona with multiple high schools that received an “A” letter grade from the state.

Basha High School is one of them. Basha, along with the rest of the district, does not have inter-sessions because administrators quickly found they weren’t well-attended. Advanced Placement study sessions held during school off-weeks, however, are very well-attended, says Basha Principal Ken James.

In 2012, nine schools in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district of North Carolina attempted to mimic the success of schools like Basha through their own program, Project Lift.

Under Project Lift, Charlotte schools receive funding from local businesses and philanthropies for improvement. The project focuses on increasing time, teaching talent, access to technology, and community and parent engagement.

According to Susan Norwood, executive director of the project, the targeted schools’ inter-sessions were attended at high rates (up to 85 percent). “The feedback from families and staff has been overwhelmingly positive,” Norwood said.

‘Unimaginably Horrible Idea’

Anthony Esolen, a professor of English literature and Western civilization at Providence College and the author of several books, including How to Destroy the Imagination of Your Child, calls year-round schooling an “unimaginably horrible idea.”

He disagrees fundamentally with extending kids’ time in school for two basic reasons. First, as a teacher, he sees many problems with the nation’s schools he believes have nothing to do with the length of the school year. Esolen says lengthening the school year, or even spacing it out to shorten the summer break, won’t fix a thing.

“If I’ve got a guy that I’ve hired to do plumbing, and my pipes still leak, I’m not going to say, ‘Oh, maybe I should pay him twice as much and have him work twice as long,’” Esolen said.

Second, Esolen says time away from school gives children the opportunity to learn how to do things they can’t do in school and to enjoy just being kids.

“They should have lives outside of the institution,” Esolen said.

Morgan Sweeney (msweeney257@gmail.com) writes from Brighton, Michigan.
Study Shows Marked Charter Enrollment Growth

By D. Brady Nelson

Approximately 2.5 million public school students were enrolled in charter schools last school year, up more than 12 percent from the past year and more than 30 percent from a decade earlier, a recent report from the National Alliance for Public Schools says based on a February survey.

"Parents are increasingly voting with their feet," said Nina Rees, president and CEO of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. "This is the largest increase in the number of students attending charter schools we've seen since [researchers began] tracking enrollment growth."

There are 6,400 charter schools in the 42 states that permit them, with between 500 and 600 new charter schools opening each year, according to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS).

But Kara Kerwin, president of the Center for Education Reform, warns, "Yes, charter school enrollment continues to grow, but according to the 2014 Survey of America's Charter Schools, it's growing at a steady, linear pace with an average rate of 340 schools per year. Growth must accelerate if charter schools are to play a central role in improving U.S. education and meeting parent demand for new and meaningful educational options."

California Led Growth

California reportedly led the nation in charter school growth last year, with 104 new schools. The NAPCS report also says about 200 public charter schools closed. The schools were closed for several reasons, including low enrollment, financial problems, and low academic performance.

"The goal of the charter school movement is not simply to increase the number of schools and students enrolled, but rather the number of high-quality public school options for families who need them most," said Rees. "These closures reflect that, and we will continue to advocate for strong accountability measures to ensure that only high-quality schools are allowed to serve our nation's students."

Despite those closures, the number of public charter schools still grew by 7 percent over the 2012–13 school year.

"The tremendous growth in charter schools over the past decade suggests that parents are enthusiastic about having new options outside of the traditional public school system," said Lindsey Burke, an education expert at The Heritage Foundation. "The type of choice charters provide enables parents to better match educational options with their children's unique learning needs, and they're jumping at the chance."

"For the handful of states that still don't allow charter schools to operate, growth in charter enrollment over the past year should demonstrate to them that they're lagging behind the education innovation curve," Burke said.

Cato Institute's Neal McCluskey offered a caveat, saying: "It is great that charters provide many kids much-needed options other than their traditional public schools. But as 'free' alternatives, charters have also been shown to draw heavily from private schools, and that is damaging a much more independent, valuable form of choice."

D. Brady Nelson (darren.nelson@me.com) is a Washington DC-based neo-Austrian economist, writer, and speaker from Brisbane, Australia and Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
Government-Funded Art Programs Combine Ambitious Claims, Dubious Results

By Mary Grabar

Art education, the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) regularly claims, will help produce a happy and successful workforce of mathematicians, computer programmers, rocket scientists, and historians.

Acting on the premise that preschool arts education will improve STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) outcomes, the department awarded a four-year $1.15 million grant to the Wolf Trap arts center for its Early Childhood STEM Learning Through the Arts program, which DOE is promoting in mailings with an ever-present photo of a Wolf Trap teacher showing preschoolers doing a hip-swiveling dance move.

In September 2013, the department awarded $2 million in grants to eight organizations and schools to develop model programs that “integrate the arts with standards-backed education programs.” The new standards are Common Core, the law of the land in 43 states for English and math but so far voluntary for art instruction.

The department is also collaborating, for the second time, with the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD), a 242-member group of 40,000 schools and community organizations. The project is called Museums: pARTners in Learning, according to a press release from the Harn Museum of Art at the University of Florida, one of the “pARTners.”

Sixteen university museums were involved in the effort to produce award-winning student art. The exhibit is an 11-year tradition.

‘The Art Is Beautiful’

Opening ceremonies took place on July 23 and were hosted by the DOE in Washington, DC. The display consisted of visual artwork and creative writing by students ages 5–17 in the arts education programs at 16 academic museums. During the opening ceremonies, Deputy Under Secretary Jamie Studley emphasized “the critical partnership for learning between art and other classroom subjects, such as chemistry and history.” Art, she said, “is a source of inspiration and a way to practice the discipline.” According to student intern/blogger Greta Oliveras, “evidence of creativity and learning in all fields” abounded, and guests remarked, “The art is beautiful” and “Wow!”

The press release that announced the pARTners program said it “celebrates the remarkable diligence and creativity of thousands of K–12 students across the country, and highlights the diverse ways in which direct engagement with the arts enriches students’ learning experiences, personal development, and critical thinking.”

Rebecca Martin Nagy, director of the Harn Museum of Art and a member of AAMD, the professional association for art museum directors, stated the obvious when she said art museums worldwide are committed to education. “It’s what we do!” she said.

‘An Eloquent Depiction’

The works of three featured artists suggest what AAMD and the Department of Education are intent on promoting.

Oliveras said “an eloquent depiction of becoming educated” came from an award-winning 10-year-old student artist from Meadowbrook Elementary School in Gainesville, Florida. The student drew inspiration for his own painting, “La Florida,” from Frank Hamilton Taylor’s “A Trip on the Ocklawaha,” a painting at the Harn.

The student said he tried to depict “the untouched majestic beauty [of Florida] before the Spanish colonization.” He explained, “When Ponce de León discovered Florida, he called it ‘La Florida,’ meaning ‘land full of flowers.’ I believe each of our brains is a ‘La Florida’ as it is a place full of ideas like flower buds and, as people help us improve these ideas, they can bloom into flowers,” Oliveras reported.

The poet-in-residence at the Harn, Anna Mebel, “touched on the different portrayals of her home state Florida—a foreigner’s and a local’s—as she recited her original poem, ‘Florida,’ also inspired by a work at the Harn, the photograph by Karen Glaser ‘Within the Swamp, Roberts Lake Strand,’” Oliveras wrote.

Then there was the performance by Amanda Stam-brosky, the Harn’s choreographer and dancer-in-residence. Her original piece, “Down to the Lake,” was inspired by four Florida landscape paintings at the Harn.

Oliveras describes Stambrosky’s piece: “Amanda incorporated her hair in her performance. Midway, she let it loose from the bun she wore as both an expression of ‘letting loose’ and a representation of the movement of the palm trees and wind. For her, concluding the piece by pulling her hair back in a bun portrayed ‘resuming life, yet kind of changed.’”

Grand Claims

In March, during the Arts in the Schools Month proclaimed by Education Secretary Arne Duncan, Doug Herbert, special assistant in the Office of Innovation and Improvement, made grand claims for arts education:

“Arts-rich schools benefit everyone. Research increasingly shows that arts education heightsen engagement for all students and can increase motivation and persistence for those most at risk of failing or dropping out of school. Learning in the arts also increasingly shows that arts education heightens engagement for all students and can increase motivation and persistence for those most at risk of failing or dropping out of school. Learning in the arts also uniquely equips students with the skills in creativity and divergent thinking as well as problem-solving and teamwork that they need to be college and career ready.”

Herbert implied research proves these points, citing ArtsEdSearch of the Arts Education Partnership, which is supported by the Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Arts.

The student art seems to be in service, or in place of, the real study of other subjects that may not be so creative or fun, such as science or math. Such undisciplined “study” will only impede students’ development of useful cultural knowledge. Real art is more than a matter of putting your hair in a bun.

Mary Grabar, Ph.D. (grabar@yahoo.com) is a resident fellow at the Alexander Hamilton Institute for the Study of Western Civilization and is founder and executive director of Dissident Prof (www.dissidentprof.com).
N.Y. Lawsuit Demands Charter Funding Equity

By Chris Neal

Charter school families in upstate New York have filed a lawsuit over what they see as an unfair lack of funding compared to traditional district schools.

The Northeast Charter School Network (NCSN) is aiding five families from New York cities Rochester and Buffalo in their effort to close the funding gap between district and charter schools.

Studies have shown in most states charters receive significantly less public funding than conventional public schools. NCSN Legal Director Harold Hinds says the disparity is too large to ignore.

“There is a tremendous need for fair and equitable funding for charter schools in New York State,” Hinds said.

Responding to opponents of the lawsuit, Hinds said, “These are still public school students attending public schools. There is no reason these children should be shortchanged in this way for the sole reason that their parents decided to exercise choice.”

Chris Neal (cdobro245@gmail.com) writes from New York, New York.

California Teacher Sues to Leave Union

By Mary C. Tillotson

A California teacher who wants to opt out of financially supporting the teachers union’s political lobbying efforts is now without professional liability insurance or a contract vote, even though those provisions are part of the established collective bargaining agreement.

“Then there’s this undercurrent of fear and intimidation. If you’re not in step with what the union is doing, if you stand against it, you’re not a part of the club. You’re bullied. It’s very intimidating,” said Rebecca Friedrichs.

In response, the teacher is suing the union, arguing for an exemption from union financial obligations.

With few exceptions, California law requires all teachers accept union membership. According to the union, approximately 30 percent of dues fund political causes, such as lobbying.

Most Member Benefits Lost

Some teachers, such as Friedrichs, become agency fee payers—they leave the union but are required to pay for services such as collective bargaining. They pay the full dues amount and then receive a rebate for the roughly 30 percent that goes to political lobbying. But Friedrichs says they lose most member benefits, and collective bargaining is still a political activity.

“What troubles me is the union is so involved in politics that they use our money to put a lot of those government officials into their jobs. Now the union is bargaining with officials who have been put in their spot by union money, and they’re union-friendly,” she said. “You have union-friendly officials on the other side, and taxpayers aren’t represented, and they’re bargaining with taxpayer money. I think that’s political.”

The plaintiffs are hoping the U.S. Supreme Court will agree to hear the case and overturn a 1977 Supreme Court decision allowing states to make union membership and union dues compulsory for public employees, says attorney Terry Pell, president of the Center for Individual Rights, which is representing the plaintiffs. A 1977 case, Abood v. Detroit Board of Education, set up the agency-fee system.

Public employees’ First Amendment right not to be compelled to support a particular political cause or candidate ought to include the right not to pay for collective bargaining, Pell says.

“The union takes positions during collective bargaining that are inherently political and reasonable people could disagree about,” Pell said. “It presses for tenure, higher salaries. Many teachers support that, but some do not, especially in California, where those policies are pushing some localities into bankruptcy. Teachers could reasonably decide they didn’t want to support a union that pushed for greater salaries and tenure protections.

“Any time a union negotiates with a political agency, that’s inherently political. They’re negotiating over how to spend public money,” Pell said, adding that other associations operate without compulsory dues.

“When they press for more money to go to education, they’re saying fewer government resources should be going to other things, like parks, libraries, [and] welfare. Those are political decisions.”

Mary C. Tillotson (mtillotson@ watchdog.org) is a reporter for Watchdog.org, where an earlier version of this article appeared. Reprinted with permission from Watchdog.org.
Nearly 68,000 Fla. Students Use Tax Credit Scholarships

By Patrick R. Gibbons

The number of low-income students served by the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program has reached a new high, with more than 67,800 students enrolled in participating private schools this fall.

The latest numbers are another sign of growing demand for the nation’s largest private school choice program, which was created in 2001. They’re also a reminder of what is at stake in a lawsuit the Florida School Boards Association and other groups filed August 28 to end it.

The scholarships, each worth $5,272 this year, are limited to families who qualify for free- or reduced-price lunch, which means only families with incomes below 185 percent of the federal poverty level are eligible. Partial scholarships are available for renewal students in households up to 230 percent of poverty.

This year’s preliminary data show the average income of participating families is 5 percent above poverty. Nearly 70 percent of scholarship students are black or Hispanic.

The latest annual evaluation of test results, released last month by Northwestern University researcher David Figlio, found scholarship students are keeping pace academically with students of all income levels nationally.

Corporations get dollar-for-dollar tax credits for contributing to the scholarship program, with an annual cap on contributions set by the state legislature. The cap is $357.8 million for 2014–15 and will grow to $447.3 million for 2015–16.

Patrick R. Gibbons (pgibbons@sufs.org) is the public affairs manager at Step Up for Students.

Common Core Doesn’t Prepare Math, Science Students for College

By Vivian Hughbanks

Common Core standards do not prepare students of math and sciences adequately for college, despite their claim to be “aligned with college and career expectations,” a new study on the standards reveals.

The highest-level math class required for students under Common Core is a partial algebra II course, which is insufficient preparation for complex university-level courses, the Pioneer Institute study The Revenge of K–12 reports. The study was conducted by Richard Phelps, founder of the Nonpartisan Education Review, and James Milgram, an emeritus professor of mathematics at Stanford University.

The lower standards mean fewer high-school graduates will be qualified to take upper-level mathematics and science courses in college, according to the study.

“People should be wary of how sneaky this has all been,” Phelps said. “People are just taking [the developers] at their word that everything is higher, deeper, more rigorous, and so forth.”

Predictor of Success

According to the study, the level of mathematics courses taken in high school is “the single strongest predictor of success in college,” more critical even than socioeconomic status, GPA, and college entrance test scores.

When high-school graduates enter college with an algebra II-level understanding of mathematics, they are unprepared to take on advanced university-level math and science classes. College-level, credit-bearing courses must then be drastically simplified to bring undereducated high school graduates up to speed.

These facts don’t keep Common Core proponents from claiming the standards are rigorous, however.

“What is important to keep in mind is that the progression in the Common Core State Standards is mathematically coherent and leads to college and career readiness at an internationally competitive level,” the Common Core website reads.

Yet, as Phelps and Milligram show, the standards are not internationally competitive in the least. Under the new standards, students are not required to take algebra until high school, Phelps notes.

“If kids are not going to be able to take algebra until ninth grade—much later than our national competitors—they’re probably not going to take calculus,” Phelps said.

Dumbing Down SAT

The study also explored the national alignment of the SAT test to the Common Core’s high-school standards. According to the study, this action lowers the standards for the SAT “to an inflexible retrospective test aligned to and locking in a low level of mathematics.” The report says this lowering of standards will make the college entrance exam less informative for school admissions departments.

“It is now clear,” the report reads, “that the original promise to anchor K–12 education to higher education and backmap the Common Core Mathematics Standards from the upper grades down to the primary grades was empty rhetoric.”

Phelps judges the national standards as a misguided effort. “I think education should be whatever the people in the local community want it to be,” Phelps said. “There are a lot of stakeholders. I’m sure employers want well-trained, quick-thinking people. But civil society needs people who understand the Constitution and know how to vote and that sort of thing. And a lot of parents want [schools] to instill values in their kids.”

Richard Phelps

FOUNDER, NONPARTISAN EDUCATION REVIEW

RICHARD PHELPS

LEARN MORE

The Revenge of K-12: How Common Core and the New SAT Lower College Standards in the U.S.

Parents Sue State Over Philly Schools

By Eric Boehm

Parents whose children attend Philadelphia public schools are asking state courts to step in after the secretary of education ignored complaints about the district.

A lawsuit filed in Commonwealth Court in September claims the parents have submitted more than 800 complaints to the Department of Education since September 2013 documenting “dire school conditions.” Because the Philadelphia School District is under the control of the state government, Secretary of Education Carolyn Dumaresq and the Department of Education have an obligation to investigate these formal complaints, but the parents allege they have failed to do so.

According to the lawsuit, the parents’ concerns are related to “staff layoffs and reductions of supplies,” along with “curriculum deficiencies,” such as lack of physical education classes and foreign language classes.

In at least one instance, a parent complained his or her child’s school lacked adequate toilet facilities.

“The state must be held accountable for its failure to address these allegations,” said Ben Geffen, an attorney with the Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia.

“The lawsuit is the latest volley in a long, ongoing battle between the school district and the administration of Gov. Tom Corbett (R).”

State funding for Philadelphia schools has increased in recent years to all-time high levels, but costs in the district have grown more rapidly.

The district receives enough revenue from state and local sources to spend more than $16,000 per student—well above the national average for public schools.

Non-Classroom Spending Soars

In short, money isn’t the issue. The real problem is how it’s spent. Only about 45 cents of every dollar spent by the school district goes to student instruction.

Pension costs and debt service payments are eating away at the district’s budget and reducing the amount of money available for classroom instruction.

“Entities can allege what they want, but the facts in this case are different.”

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Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Corbett is under attack from unions and Democrats who accuse him of cutting education funding when he took office in 2011. But Corbett is pushing back against that message and touting the $5.5 billion being spent statewide on education this year.

More Political Attacks

Corbett is under attack from unions and Democrats, including gubernatorial nominee Tom Wolf (D), for cutting education funding when he took office in 2011.

In new ads and recent interviews, Corbett is pushing back against that message and touting the $5.5 billion being spent statewide on education this year.

But the parents who filed suit say they expect the Department of Education to do more. They are asking the Commonwealth Court to order Dumaresq to investigate the claims of curriculum deficiencies and, if necessary, to take corrective action.

Eric Boehm (Eric@PAIndependent.com) writes for Pennsylvania Independent. Article reprinted with permission from Pennsylvania Independent.
20 Ohio Schools Eligible for Parent Trigger Reform

By Heather Kays

Twenty schools in Columbus, Ohio are now eligible for reform under the state’s parent trigger law.

The latest state report card data show those schools failed to improve enough to avoid the parent trigger option. The parent trigger law, passed as part of the state’s budget in 2011, empowers parents to decide how to reform chronically low-performing schools.

The data released in September by the Ohio Department of Education show these schools have been ranked among the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools statewide for three consecutive years.

Using the parent trigger, a majority of parents could vote to completely change the way these schools operate: choosing to convert government-run schools into charter schools, giving control of the school to the state, or allowing students to enroll in neighboring districts.

Other possible options include replacing at least 70 percent of the staff or handing operations over to an outside group. Change could take place for the 2015–16 school year.

How It Works

Greg Harris, state director for the Ohio nonprofit group Students First, said the process has just begun in Columbus. The eligible schools were announced and a presentation was made in September to the Ohio Department of Education. The district has created a website about the issue, Harris says.

Harris is thrilled at the prospect of reform. “The school board in particular has been saying that the parent trigger law could be disruptive and lead to layoffs,” Harris said. “But institutions are created to serve people, and not the other way around.”

Students First has offered to clarify the law, tell parents what options they have, and act as liaisons between parents and the district. The organization will not collect petition signatures or start campaigns.

“We want this to be parent-driven,” said Harris. “The spirit of the law is providing parents with information so that they can make choices. What we are going to be is a good partner for parents who want to get something going.”

How It Started

The parent trigger law applies only to Columbus City Schools. Former superintendent Gene Harris volunteered the district as a pilot location several years ago. The law has not been used in Ohio elsewhere. The reform process kicks in if 50 percent of parents in an eligible school district or schools within a district sign a petition demanding reform. A petition must be submitted to the district by December 31 to force a change for the following school year.

The first parent trigger law in the U.S. was passed in California in 2010. Parents in two California districts have since tried to use the parent trigger law, but both efforts have been blocked by legal challenges.

Parents Blamed

Jeff Warner, communications director for the Columbus School District, says there are concerns the law could create problems for the district, possibly including layoffs.

“Columbus has great schools to serve our students,” said Warner.

“Since [the parent trigger is] part of state law, we have to abide by it.

“The biggest concern is making sure parents understand what we have available,” Warner said, claiming the real problem is lack of parental involvement.

Warner says some of the district’s best teachers are in schools that could now be considered for the parent trigger.

“If we don’t get the parents involved, the performance is going to be the same no matter what,” said Warner.

Requires Parental Involvement

Education advocates such as Greg Harris argue the parent trigger law inherently includes parental involvement by requiring such a significant amount of parental support for the law to go into effect.

“The parent trigger law gives parents leverage in a system that otherwise acts like it doesn’t have time for them,” said Harris. Harris says the idea parents will not act in the best interest of their own children is a myth.

“People dismiss the parent[s’] role, but even in cities like Detroit, the highest poverty city in the country as I understand it, half the parents have made a choice when given the option,” said Warner. “When you empower parents with options, they will seize them.”

Heather Kays (hkays@heartland.org) is a research fellow with The Heartland Institute and managing editor of School Reform News.
New AP History CurriculumAccentuates the Negative

By Loren Heal

The College Board has changed its Advanced Placement (AP) U.S. history curriculum so it now omits central figures and battles from American history and puts in their place negative depictions of U.S. history.

The organization claims its material only adds to and does not replace state-based material. The College Board was contacted for comment but did not respond.

“There are about 500,000 kids a year who take AP U.S. History,” said Texas State Board of Education member Ken Mercer, who opposes the changes. “There’s the class, and then the exam.

“Up until last May,” said Mercer, “the AP History was whatever you had for your state standard, and on top of that was this five-page topical document. Well, starting this fall it’s not a five page, but a 98-page framework.”

Mercer added, “They start out the first week of U.S. History talking about this period 1491 to 1607, which was discussed before but very lightly. This goes very deep into Indian labor, African slavery, about the belief in white supremacy. That caught me off guard—‘a belief in white superiority that justified the treatment of Africans and Indians.’ We haven’t even come to the founding of Jamestown yet, and that’s how the students start off.”

‘A Very Negative Tone’

“In my opinion the biggest change is a very negative tone,” Mercer said. Larry Krieger, a retired history teacher who taught in New Jersey for years, said “[Social analyst] Stanley Kurtz demolishes the College Board’s contention that the new framework is ‘balanced,’ It clearly is not. His article proves beyond any doubt that the College Board had a specific agenda. The framework authors set aside the concept of American exceptionalism and omitted seminal documents from Winthrop’s ‘City Upon a Hill’ sermon to Dr. King’s ‘I Have a Dream’ speech. Instead, they provide a detailed narrative that stresses unending oppression and exploitation.”

In the National Review Online article to which Krieger refers, Kurtz called for the framework to be scrapped, writing, “The College Board’s new and vastly more detailed guidelines can only be interpreted as an attempt to hijack the teaching of U.S. history on behalf of a leftist political and ideological perspective.”

Kurtz added, “Here is the basic problem with the 98-page framework and I’ve beat this question to death with the College Board: they say that ‘…what is testable is in the framework. But educators have ‘flexibility’, that’s their word, quote-unquote, to teach the state standards. But if you’re an educator, when you read this you think, ‘I can teach about Bunker Hill and about Jefferson, but it’s not going to be tested.’ So you’re going to start teaching to the test.”

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Proposed Texas Textbooks
Attacked by Lobbying Group

By H. Sterling Burnett

Environmental lobbyists are trying to censor the portrayal of climate science in textbooks being considered for adoption by the Texas Board of Education (TBOE).

TBOE is in the process of approving new social studies textbooks for the first time in 12 years. The books could be used in schools for more than a decade. Because Texas is a huge market for textbook publishers, when TBOE adopts a textbook, many school districts across the nation follow.

The National Center for Science Education (NCSE), a group that promotes the view humans are causing catastrophic global warming, sharply criticized the textbooks, issuing a report saying Texas’s proposed textbooks were biased because they present basic questions of climate science as open for debate.

Debating over Debate

Dr. Minda Berbeco, director of NCSE, said, “The scientific debate over whether climate change is happening and who is responsible has been over for years,” in a press statement.

Consensus exists on two points: Carbon dioxide is a greenhouse gas, and humans have had some effect on Earth’s climate. The textbooks recognize other important questions remain unanswered.

For instance, one proposed textbook states, “Some scientists say it is natural for the Earth’s temperature to be higher for a few years” and “They predict we’ll have some cooler years and things will even out.” NCSE claims the textbook writers do not understand the material they are covering, and it says it knows of no publishing climate scientist who holds the views stated in the textbooks.

One of the proposed textbooks, published by McGraw-Hill, cites extensive research from The Heartland Institute, which publishes School Reform News, establishing numerous scientific studies affirm natural variation of the climate. The textbook suggests scientists disagree on the cause of climate change, and after providing evidence from both sides, asks students to decide for themselves.

“In Texas, questions of climate change certainly aren’t settled,” said Colin Cahoon, a Dallas attorney and Heartland Institute policy advisor. “Efforts by environmentalists to censor textbooks are typical of their tactics to shut down debate and stifle discussion. I’m happy our [Board of Education] is standing up for scientific integrity and against the bullying tactics of environmentalists.”

Colin Cahoon
Policy Advisor
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Texas-based H. Sterling Burnett (hsburnett@heartland.org) is a research fellow with The Heartland Institute.
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